

Back the Vac Up!

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A situation I observed years ago, and things I've seen during several East and West Coast safety surveys, prompt me to warn shipmates about the dangers of improperly using wet-and-dry vacuum cleaners.

The situation I saw took place aboard my last ship. A friend and I were having a discussion in the hangar bay when I noticed a working party using a wet vacuum to clean out tie-down padeyes. The Sailors had been vacuuming for a while, and I began to wonder when they were going to empty the wet-vac. As I pondered, I suddenly noticed the vacuum cleaner shooting liquid out its top, as if on cue. One of the working-party Sailors ran to unplug the machine. Seeing water shoot out, because the vacuum obviously was full of liquid, made me realize someone probably had removed the float-ball. It would have prevented this hangar-bay geyser because the float-ball is designed to shut off the vacuum when the water in the canister reaches a certain level.

The Sailors stopped their work and took the vacuum to the electrical tool-issue room for a post-incident inspection and safety-check. This incident would not have happened had the Sailors read the Navy's rules and the manufacturer's instructions for the wet-vac they were using. The situation with my shipmates' vacuum was not unique—too many Sailors either do not read, or they simply ignore, operators' and owners' manuals when using these wet-vacs.

I have seen more than 10 different types of wet-and-dry vacuums in use. Whether a small, one-gallon or a 13-gallon vacuum is involved, inspections also often reveal missing dry or wet filters. As for the missing float-ball, that also happens too often.

Meanwhile, think about vacuuming tie-down padeyes: Unless you have MSDS documentation in your pocket proving otherwise, vacuuming any part of a flight or hangar deck probably includes sucking up hazardous—and potentially combustible—liquids. FOD walkdowns should eliminate



Photo by Matthew J. Thomas

Read and heed the warnings on that wet-and-dry vacuum cleaner before you use it!

most solid objects, but a stray can damage your vacuum.

While NSTM 300, (revision five, Electric Plant General) outlines the requirements for shipboard use of any portable electrical equipment, manufacturers' recommendations also must be followed. These recommendations are critical to avoiding mishaps and preventing equipment damage or injury when using these housekeeping wet-vacs. Install required filters to prevent contaminating the motor and other components, and don't remove or bypass any safety features like the float-ball. Read all the vacuum's assembly and usage instructions before attaching the wheels and charging into "parts unknown."

Most such vacuums have similar warnings: "Do not pick up hazardous, combustible, flammable, material or liquids, hot coals or ashes or use in an area where they may be present. Do not use in the rain; store indoors."

Many of these warnings are on the vacuum's top, while some might be found on its side. No matter where the warning label is, before you use that wet-and-dry vacuum, find and heed the warnings—they are there for a reason. ⚠



For More Info...

Refer to OpNav Instruction 5100.19D and the NavOSH Program Manual for Forces Afloat, Paragraphs C0903 and D0503, Electrical Precautions.